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AUTHOR Ponessa, Joan M.
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ABSTRACT

Despite statewide standards, the accuracy of statistical data on dropouts reported by New Jersey schools appears to vary considerably from district to district. Moreover, statewide dropout rates differ significantly depending on the method of calculation used. Several different methodologies, which incorporate unverified information collected from local school districts, result in the reporting of different statewide dropout rates in national and state reports. None of these methods includes information on individual students, or on students who drop out of elementary school. Varying interpretations of state dropout reporting requirements and the wide range of dropout rates reported by districts underscore the need for more carefully defined criteria for district reporting as well as evaluations of the accuracy of the reported data. However, the additional information needed to accurately compute the dropout rate would place huge demands on urban districts, most of which have little or no computerized support due to financial constraints as well as to reluctance to adapt to new technologies. The Department of Education must emphasize the requirement for reporting presecondary dropouts and incorporate that information in the calculation of statewide dropout rates. A statewide electronic student tracking system, interconnected to district data bases, appears to be the only realistic solution to overseeing student enrollment status and relieving the ever-growing reporting burdens on urban districts. (FMW)

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Public Affairs Research Institute of New Jersey, Inc.

Suite 100, 212 Carnegie Center, Princeton, NJ 08540-6212
(609) 452-0220

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Accurate Dropout Reporting Procedures Needed

Introduction

As the decade begins, New Jersey policymakers face new challenges in educating and preparing the urban youth of the Garden State for tomorrow's workplace. A shrinking pool of workers is already causing businesses to scramble for the available qualified high school graduates. New partnerships between schools and corporations are forming to encourage younger students to stay in school until they receive their high school diplomas. But the problem remains, as many urban students drop out of school before they are ready to function in an increasingly competitive and challenging work environment. If real solutions are to be found, the depth of the problem must be understood, and, at present, the actual number of students dropping out from New Jersey elementary and secondary schools remains speculative.

New Jersey school districts are expected to follow a set of basic guidelines, established by the state Department of Education and based on national standards, for dropout data collections. According to these guidelines, public elementary and secondary schools are presently required to submit information, but not the names, of "students who discontinued school before completing the prescribed course of study without transferring to a private or a public school, or other educational institution." This requirement includes students who drop out between school terms, as well as those who leave during the school year. Despite these statewide standards, dropout reporting accuracy appears to vary considerably from district to district in New Jersey. Moreover, statewide dropout rates have been found to differ significantly depending on the method of calculation used.

Different Methods, Different Dropout Rates

Several different methodologies which incorporate information collected from local school districts are used to calculate dropout rates. Probably the most widely quoted are the annual residual rates derived from the United States Department of Education's graduation rates as recorded on the "Secretary's Wall Chart." This resource is indeed a wall-sized chart issued annually containing educational information from all fifty states. New Jersey, for instance, is listed as having a graduation rate of 77.4% in 1988 and thus an implied "dropout rate" of 22.6%. Using this residual method of calculation, the dropout rate is computed by determining the number of graduates in a given year, dividing by the ninth grade enrollment four years earlier.

This report is the first step in a year-long project to be conducted by the Public Affairs Research Institute concerning the dropout situation in New Jersey. Through a series of publications and forums, the Research Institute will explore various aspects of the dropout issue; examine current dropout prevention programs; identify possible solutions; and work to bring together leaders from business, government, community groups, and education to help keep kids in school.

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multiplying by 100, and then subtracting the result from 100%. The U.S. Department of Education adjusts the graduation rates for in and out of state migration and for ungraded students to increase the accuracy of state-by-state comparisons.

When the New Jersey Department of Education calculates the dropout rate for the summary section of its annual "Vital Education Statistics" publication, a slightly different approach is used. A cohort rate is calculated by taking the graduating class's reported total number of dropouts from the ninth grade through twelfth grade, dividing by the number of students entering as ninth graders four years earlier, and multiplying by 100 to obtain a percentage. The statewide rate calculated for the 1988-1989 graduating class was 16.7%; for 1987-88, 16.1%; and for 1986-87, 16.2%. The significantly lower dropout rate using the state's cohort method of calculation appears to be primarily the result of under-reporting by some districts, as will be discussed in greater detail later in this report. On the other hand, the residual of the "Secretary's Wall Chart" graduation rate seems to overestimate the high school dropout rate somewhat, because the graduation figures used fail to include students who do not graduate in four years but subsequently complete alternative secondary education programs.

Both of the methods described above relate dropout rates to a class of students followed over a period of time as opposed to an annual rate of dropping out, sometimes called an event or incidence rate, which is a snapshot of a particular year. "School Report Cards" issued in November, 1989, by the New Jersey Department of Education for each school in the Garden State list dropout percentages determined by this alternative method. The "School Report Card" dropout rates represent the total number of students leaving school between September, 1987, and August, 1988, divided by the September student enrollment and multiplied by 100. The statistic generated by this method is considerably lower than those previously discussed, because it represents a one-year figure, not a cumulative total over a four-year period. The state average reported by the state Department of Education for this calculation was 4.9%, as opposed to the greater than 16% cohort rates offered by that same department in its most recent "Vital Education Statistics" reports. Thus, while the "School Report Cards" did include a note of explanation of how this calculation differs from the other method employed by the Department, the percentage of dropouts reported to parents for each school in New Jersey was low in comparison to other types of rate calculations and difficult to relate to the more frequently cited dropout figures.

The New Jersey Department of Education's "Vital Education Statistics" further details dropout counts, listing the number of dropouts reported by school districts by county, racial and ethnic origin, grade level, and stated reasons for dropping out. Between September, 1988, and August, 1989, according to the "Vital Education Statistics" data, 16,267 students dropped out of school. Analysis of the Department's district by district statistics shows that 41% of these young men and women left one of the fifteen largest urban school districts. In 1988-89, according to the Research Institute staff's calculations using the Department of Education's data, 56% of these urban dropouts were black and 33% were Hispanic. Further study of the Department's statistics reveals that approximately one-third of these urban students left before completing the ninth grade. As with other statewide statistics, it is important when evaluating this data to keep in mind that the level of accuracy is dependent on the information supplied by individual school districts. In most cases, the data are not subjected by the New Jersey Department of Education to independent tests for accuracy; the data are merely collated by the Department for various reports.

District Policies Affect Dropout Counts

Interpretation of state dropout reporting requirements varies from district to district in New Jersey. For example, some districts report only students over sixteen years of age who come into a school office and sign a form stating that they are leaving school. Other districts report every student who does not appear at the school to which he was assigned, regardless of whether the student formally withdrew. In reviewing "School Report Cards" for high schools in the fifteen largest urban districts, the Research Institute staff found annual reported dropout rates ranging from 3.9% for Camden High School to 34.6% for Trenton High School, despite the fact that both schools are part of districts generally having dropout rates, using the other calculation methods, of over 50%. **This wide range of reported dropout rates underscores the need for a more carefully defined set of criteria for school district reporting as well as for evaluations by the state Department of Education to confirm the accuracy of the reported data and to enforce district compliance.**

Since most dropout information available is for the high school level, ninth through twelfth grade, the rates for younger students dropping

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reporting criteria for the two reports, it is unclear why different definitions of special education dropouts are being employed within a single state agency. Moreover, it appears that not every district interprets the data requests in the same way. In the last four years, Elizabeth, Newark, and Vineland consistently have reported special education student dropouts for the "Vital Education Statistics" report representing from 5% to 12% of their total number of dropouts. On the other hand, district administrators in Camden and Irvington have reported few or no special education students dropping out during the same period. Also, it would appear that special education students placed in private schools by a school district who subsequently drop out are often being considered in that district's child study team dropout report but not in the school district's dropout report.

More Variables In Counting Dropouts

One of the most significant variables in school dropout counting is student mobility. The mobility rate for each school, according to the state Department of Education's "School Report Cards," is "obtained by adding the number of new students to the number of students who left to attend elsewhere and then dividing by the total number of students present for any part of the year." The higher the percentage, the more the students change schools, thereby losing continuity in instruction. This is an especially difficult problem in the larger urban areas, such as Newark, where the percentage of students who have not attended the same school for the whole year is often over 50%. The difficulties in tracking individual students in districts with high mobility rates are often insurmountable given present staffing patterns and record keeping procedures, most of which are not computerized. Administrators in some of the larger districts have told the Research Institute staff that enrollment changes constantly and dropout counts are difficult to determine. By the time the district establishes that a student's health records are in order, tests the student for proper placement, and obtains previous academic records, several weeks or even months may have elapsed. During that period, the student may have transferred to another school, disappeared, or been asked to leave because of lack of proof of residence. The problem of tracking such students is exacerbated by the lack of computerized records.

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The New Jersey Department of Education does not collect information relating dropouts to curriculum or type of program. As a result, some vocational education studen leaving school prior to graduation "fall through the cracks" in dropout reporting. Dropout counting is further complicated when a student transfers out of a general high school setting. If a student leaves school with the stated purpose of pursuing a diploma through an adult high school or General Education Development (GED) testing program, a New Jersey school district would not count that student as a dropout. It should be noted that Department regulations require that in order to participate in an adult high school or a GED preparatory program "a person must be 18 years of age and out of school." Exceptions to this rule, for sixteen and seventeen year old persons, require a Certification of Non-Enrollment in School signed by either the high school principal or superintendent of schools in the district of residence. Still, the home school district usually has no evidence that the student actually is enrolled in such a program, except for the request of transcripts which are made by adult high schools. Dropouts from these settings do not appear in the Department's counting process.

On the plus side of the counting dilemma are the many students returning to school after some period of time in order to complete their course of study and receive a traditional high school diploma or enrolling in programs to prepare for the GED. There is no question that some students are returning to their previous setting in the local high school. But, in urban areas where record keeping is problematic, the number of returnees is speculative. What is known is that 8,021 students around the state are enrolled in adult high schools and 11,751 are enrolled in GED preparation programs. In 1988, 6,495 young men and women, nineteen years of age and under, took the GED. Also, the New Jersey Departments of Education and Community Affairs, through a cooperative effort, sponsor a program for high school age dropouts called the New Jersey Youth Corps. This program recently received national recognition by the Office of Education and Research of the U.S. Department of Education. Since 1985, over 6,000 high school dropouts have participated in Youth Corps programs statewide.

Figures reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reveal that nationally about 50% of dropouts eventually return and complete requirements for a high school diploma or GED. However, the NCES data also show that the returnee rate is considerably less for Hispanics. Whether these conclusions hold true in the urban areas of New Jersey is unknown. Several years ago, Atlantic City High School began a project of tracking students after they dropped out of school.

out of schools is frequently overlooked. A significant problem with both the New Jersey Education Department's summary dropout figures and the residuals of the U.S. Education Department's graduation rates is that neither recognizes the ever-increasing numbers of students leaving before the ninth grade. According to Dr. Philip Burch of Rutgers University's Bureau of Government Research, in a March, 1990, position paper for the Governor's Committee on Children's Services Planning, "It should be borne in mind that in some of the big urban districts there are, according to DOE data, a significant number of dropouts in the pre-secondary school years who are not included in the ninth grade-to-graduation dropout totals." Furthermore, while districts in New Jersey are required to report to the state Department of Education all students who drop out of school from any grade, some districts choose to ignore the requirement and include only grades nine through twelve. For example, Irvington and East Orange, both districts which by most other indicators show significant dropout problems, reported that no students left school before entering high school in 1988-89. For the two previous years, Irvington reported a pre-high school dropout figure equivalent to 22% of its total number of dropouts, but East Orange consistently appears to ignore younger dropouts. In contrast, Atlantic City reported the equivalent of 19% of that district's dropouts left before entering ninth grade in 1988-89, and Union City reported the equivalent of 34% of its dropouts as having left before achieving this level.

Elementary school dropouts appear to be an especially significant matter within the Hispanic community. Dr. Elsa Nunez-Wormack, Chairperson of the Board of Directors of Aspira of New Jersey, a Puerto Rican advocacy group, and Associate Dean of Faculty of the College of Staten Island, has served as the lead research consultant for the Newark section of the "Five Cities Dropout Study," a joint project of Aspira and the Ford Foundation. Based on her work for this study, Dr. Nunez-Wormack estimates that ***"80% of Puerto Rican students in Newark drop out of school, and most of them leave before even entering high school."*** Other experts from around the country agree that the number of Hispanic youngsters dropping out of elementary school is considerable. Roberto Fernandez of the University of Arizona's Department of Sociology points out that "Hispanics are likely to have a disproportionate share of pre-high school dropouts." Similarly, Dr. William Velez of the University of Wisconsin's Department of Sociology observes that high school statistics have limitations as a source of data for studying the problem of Hispanic dropouts, and such "sampling bias can lead to low estimates of dropout rates for Hispanics."

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Administrators from some of the larger urban areas with several high schools have told the Research Institute staff that students are not successfully tracked from elementary or junior high school to senior high school. Assigning an eighth grade student to a high school for the following fall does not mean the student will necessarily attend the high school come September, and few, if any, attempts are made to track individual students. Many kids drop out at this point yet are not reported as dropouts.

School administrators also expressed reluctance to drop from the rolls a truant student who is under sixteen years of age, even though achieving higher attendance rates is important in meeting the goals of the state government's monitoring process. Dropping out of school before the age of sixteen is illegal in New Jersey, and school attendance officers are required to notify parents or guardians, in writing, if a child has not been attending school. If the child does not return to school within five days of this notification, the parents or guardians are subject to disorderly persons charges and/or the student is subject to arrest as a juvenile delinquent. (N.J.S.A. 18A:38-27 to 18A:38-31) Because of the difficulties often experienced by urban school districts in locating either the student or family, an underage student may be kept on roll, despite attendance requirements, until the end of the school year. If such a student does not reappear in the fall, he simply may be lost to the system and not counted as an enrollee or dropout.

Beyond the issue of pre-high school dropout reporting, another area of possible concern regarding the dropout figures collated by the New Jersey Department of Education is the reporting of special education students. The state Department of Education's "Special Education Statistical Report" cites 3,280 special education student dropouts in 1988-89. For the same year, the same department's yearly "Vital Education Statistics" report classifies only 1,284 dropouts in the special education category. The corresponding counts for 1987-88 were 3,262 and 1,168, respectively, and for 1986-87, 2,667 and 1,082. (Note that the "Vital Education Statistics" data are obtained from district administrators; the figures for the "Special Education Statistical Report" come from child study team reports.) While Department officials maintain that these discrepancies are largely the result of differing

The high school principal, Mr. Ernest Harper, has told the Research Institute staff that many of the students from his school do return to some type of academic program to receive a high school diploma. On the other hand, Dr. Jann Azumi, Newark Public Schools' Division of Research and Evaluation, has found that an "overwhelming percentage of Newark's students are not returning to other types of educational training."

Collecting The Data

The need for caution when comparing dropout figures cannot be overemphasized and reinforces the growing national concern for standard methods of reporting dropout rates, as well as collecting dropout information. To this end, approximately thirty states have agreed to incorporate the Council of Chief State School Officers' (CCSSO) Task Force recommendations on dropout data collection in order to supply the National Center for Education Statistics with comparable data. The recommendations include use of grade levels seven to twelve in the baseline population, an autumn to autumn counting period, guidelines for an allowable time for unexplained student absences, and identification of alternative education settings. New Jersey is one of the states which has agreed to use the standardized method for collecting data and, according to Howard Bookin, Director of Information Resources Management for the state Department of Education, has been working toward collecting all the data necessary to satisfy the national reporting process. To that end, the Department has been testing new methods of data collection in Perth Amboy. In addition, after July 1, 1990, New Jersey school districts will also be required to submit the names of the students who drop out of school. Legislation sponsored by Senator Ronald L. Rice (D-Essex) requiring this change in procedure was signed into law in December of 1989 (P.L. 1989, Chapter 214).

The question remains, however, are larger urban districts willing or able to respond to the new reporting requirements? The school districts of the Garden State submit over 200 forms yearly to the New Jersey Department of Education, according to Mr. Bookin. Now, in response to the Rice legislation, the state Department of Education will also expect districts to submit individual forms for each dropout as well as transfer forms for students leaving for another school. The state Department of Education has a responsibility to collect from school districts the information needed to maintain accountability, and accurate dropout figures are certainly relevant. Unfortunately, most of the urban districts have little or no computerized support systems due to financial constraints as well as to a simple reluctance to adapt to new ways of doing business.

A Possible Solution

One of the biggest problems in maintaining accurate dropout records for the state of New Jersey is this failure to use the technology available to keep track of students. Other states have been facing problems similar to New Jersey's but have addressed the necessity of student tracking in a straightforward manner. Texas, a state where mobility is a particular problem in some areas, has been working to stabilize record keeping by installing a statewide computer system with a database including every public school student identified by social security number or an assigned number. Florida has an electronic network linking attendance records at district offices directly to the Florida Department of Education. These states are able to record accurate enrollment data and to handle intrastate transfers, dropouts, and returnees with minimum confusion. The idea of successfully tracking large numbers of students in a mobile society is not new or revolutionary. The Migrant Student Record Transfer System (MSRTS), which has been operational since 1970, has served as a useful model of a large system employed to collect student data. Over 700,000 student records are available in the active MSRTS database. This system has 162 terminals serving 49 states, including New Jersey, and receives, stores, and transmits health and educational information to all schools and other education or health organizations that serve migrant children.

But, how are New Jersey's educational leaders addressing the problems associated with tracking students? In this state, every school district has been on its own. Some have state-of-the-art computer systems linking individual schools to the district office. The majority do not, especially the larger urban districts who need such systems the most. The state Department of Education has played a role in encouraging the move to electronic record keeping by assisting in staff training through the funding of three educational technology training centers (ETTCs), but it would appear that the funding for this training will be withdrawn from next year's budget. Sooner or later, however, New Jersey will have to invest in an adequate educational record keeping system. The initial cost will necessitate some creative and long range planning, but increasing demands on the state's educational system require levels of accountability not possible with the present record keeping process.

Conclusion

The first step to solving the dropout problem must be to understand the problem. Unless we have adequate and accurate information from our urban areas, where the dropout problem is most severe, we cannot

relate to the magnitude of the situation. The New Jersey Department of Education must clearly spell out the parameters for the reporting of dropouts and insist on compliance. **The requirement for reporting pre-secondary school dropouts must be emphasized, and, under no circumstances, should the state Department of Education's dropout rate calculation continue to ignore these early dropouts.** Also, instead of moving away from assisting districts with computer technology, such as eliminating staff training in the ETTCs, New Jersey state government should renew efforts to help larger urban districts in this area.

A statewide electronic student tracking system interconnected to district data bases is the only realistic solution to overseeing the enrollment status of New Jersey students and relieving the ever-growing reporting burdens, especially in urban districts. Not only would state-level tracking provide benefits for individual districts in handling enrollment data, transfers, dropouts, test scores, and student health records, but it would be a source of valuable information for the New Jersey Department of Education in evaluating state programs. The need for such a system becomes even more relevant as the state aid formulas come under further scrutiny.

—Joan M. Ponessa

Martin S. Grogan contributed to the preparation of this publication.

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